

Reflecting Zoroastrian Culture in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*

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Abstract

In the age of globalization when the language and culture of man, in uniformity, seems to be Westernized, at a deeper level, is maintained by local folk. These local folks, in the globalizing world, feared of losing their culture, language and identity grip it more tightly than ever before and struggle hard to ensure their presence through both the direct and indirect ways. The Parsis, a micro-minority community which now on the verge of extinction, is trying hard to maintain their presence in every possible-way. In this regard most of the Parsi writers concern themselves with their culture, tradition, and identity. Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani-Parsi writer who now lives in Houston, Texas, America, is also concerned with the Parsi faith. Sidhwa has authored a number of novels, of which the most important, based on the community, are *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *Ice Candy Man* (1988), *The Pakistani Bride* (1990), and *An American Brat* (1993). For the paper, Sidhwa's *An American Brat* has been chosen to analyse from the view point of its culture, identity, and language.

Keywords- *Globalization, Community, Identity, Culture*

Introduction

Sidhwa has represented these in a way that depicts at both the level, local and globalized. The protagonist of the novel, Firoza, whose family belongs to local Pakistani-Parsi community who observes every occasion of Parsi faith but Firoza, later in her life, coming into the contact to the West, breaks the convention and loves and wants to marry a non-Parsi which is forbidden in Zoroastrianism. The novel has two aspects of Zoroastrianism, religio-conservatism (the instinct of a section from particular religion which does not allow anything new), and religio-liberalism (the reform allowing instinct of a section from particular religion). The older generation, which includes Khutlibai, Zareen, Cyrus, Rohinton, Soonamai etc. belongs to the former, while the younger generation, which includes Feroza, Manek and Bunny etc. to the later. Along with the cultural reflection there is the development of the personality in the character of Firoza Ginwalla who in the beginning “won’t even receive the phone!” because it might be someone she does not know, is sent to America to “to broaden her outlook, get this puritanical out of her head” starts wearing jeans and shorts and mixes with others and falls in love and “wants to marry a non.” She, later, becomes independent of Manek and at last ends in thinking not to return home.

Basically, based on the three principles, *Humata* (Good thoughts), *Hukhata* (Good words) and *Havarashta* (Good Deeds), the Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions of the world, though now the smallest. The religion is named after Prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra which is Greek for “shining Light”). As for his birth, Azerbaijan is commonly believed place. While some scholars are of the view that he was born in Balk now in Afghanistan, or Sogdia and Chorasmia in Tajikistan, or near the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan. Different views are there on his birth period too. According to Greek he was born in about 6350 B.C, Archeologists in China place it 1767 B.C. While according to Persian writing it is 250 years before Alexander i.e. 600 B.C.

Zoroastrianism flourished in the middle East from fifth century B.C. to sixth century A. D. which was under the Achaemenian, the Parthian and the Sassanian regime before the invasion of Arabs with their newly arrived religion, Islam. The new rulers exploited the natives in every possible way and gave only three options to the natives. Firstly, they must convert into Islam, or (secondly) pay a heavy tax i.e. Jazia, or (thirdly) Death.

Not interested in taking the new belief as their own and to escape from the persecution, some of the Parsis fled from Iran boarding on ships for safe heaven. In 936 A.D. they landed in Diu and later spread in Gujrat and finally settled in Bombay and other parts of the country.

In India Parsi community flourished during the reign of Akbar the Great. When on March 12th, 1579 for the first time Merji Rana was elected as the chief priest, the head of the community both on the religious affairs as well as social advisor, was called by the Emperor, Akbar the Great to his

Court. Akbar was very anxious to know about this religion and bestowed “a free grant of two hundred acres of land at Navsari, as a mark of royal favour. In the year 1595 Akbar ordered a further free grant of one hundred acres at the Navsari to ‘dastur’s’ son, KaikobadMahyar, who had succeeded his father on his death.” (Karka)

The community, which sees the world as a beautiful creation of Ahura Mazda and which must be evolved to its perfection, instantly involved in business and came to be elite class during the Mughal Era because the official language at the time was Farsi and Parsi people knew it well, and the richest community during the British Empire as Lord Curzon said that “no Indian of the present generation has done more for commerce and industry than Mr. Jamshedjee Tata” who was a Parsi, and established Tata Oil Mills Co. (TOMCO) in 1917 and Tata Engineering and Locomotive Co.(TELCO) in 1945. Tata Air Lines was founded in 1932 and in 1948 Air India International was started by the same. After its nationalization in 1953 these are known as Indian Air Lines and Air India respectively. The community established itself in every possible field. DadabhaiNaoroji, in1892, was the first Indian to be elected to the House of Commons. And Pheroza Mehta associated himself to the Indian National Congress. In music there was Zubin Mehta. However, the community declined in power and wealth, and started emigrating to the West after the Independence of India.

Falling in the line is Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani Parsi writer who now lives in the United States of America. Sidhwa has authored a number of novels, of which the most important, based on the community, are *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *Ice Candy Man* (1988), *The Pakistani Bride* (1990), and *An American Brat* (1993). Most of the novels written by BapsiSidhwaare multicultural but ethno-centric. In *An American Brat* she has represented Parsi, Muslim and Western Culture but dealt Parsi ethnicity in minute detail. She further deals with the Parsis being Westernized as is the case of Firoza and Bunny. Bunny who is fifteen-year-old says, while the family conference is called in Zareen’s sitting room after firoza has sent the photos of David and declared her intention to marry David, “for God’s sake! You’re carrying on as if Firoza’s dead! She’s only getting married, for God’s sake!” (268)

An American Brat is a chronicle of adventure of a fifteen-year-old Firoza, a girl from a conservative Parsi family in Pakistan. Feroza, who is believed to have adopted “un-Parsi like orthodoxy in her attitude and outlook”, does not pick the receiver because it may be one whom she does not know and objects to the way her mother wears the “sleeveless sari-blouse”, is sent to USA to broaden her outlook. The novel has two aspects of Zoroastrianism, religio-conservatism (the instinct of a section from particular religion which does not allow anything new), religio-liberalism (the reform allowing instinct of a section from particular religion). The older generation, which includes Khutlibai, Zareen, Cyrus, Rohinton, Soonamai etc. belongs to the former, while the younger generation, which includes Feroza, Manek and Bunny etc. to the later.

In the beginning of the novel we see Firoza in Karachi. She is a project of Parsi culture and is totally embedded in it. The Parsi community in Karachi is shown as insular who dread any kind of contract with the majority community of Pakistan. Their chief fear is the intrusion of a young man who from any other community who could marry one of their young girls. Perin Powrie whose history is never narrated in the novel is used and again as an admonition as a warning to any young people looking beyond the Parsi community for partners. It is to be noted that the Parsi community predominantly based in Bombay and Karachi are micro-minority where marriage beyond the community is forbidden. Thus, it has caused the community to decline rapidly and its present population is approximately 70,000 and out of which 50,000 lives in India and Pakistan.

However, Firoza seems to be more open to cross-cultural influences and her mother is alarmed at Firoza's imbibing non-Parsi ideas. For example, Firoza objects to her mother's wearing a Saree and sleeveless blouse which she considers to be not in keeping with the dominant Pakistani culture. She says "Mother please don't come to school dressed like that"(10). And later when she is sent to America as a student but actually more as a corrective experience, to cure her of growing narrowness of vision, firstly America comes as a cultural shock to Firoza. But under the tutelage of her uncle Manek, Firoza soon acquires American ways. But this too is not liked by Firoza's Parsi family and community. And when Firoza's family comes to know that she is going to marry an American Jew, all their Parsi insularity comes to the fore. Firoza's mother sets off for America and finally succeeds in breaking off the relationship. Jyoti Yadav in her writing *Ethnic Anxiety and Cultural Adaptability* rightly says:

These ... conflicts in the novel have many complicated structures and nuances with conflicting claims. For instance while in Pakistan Zareen emerges as a champion of Parsi liberality in opposition to Islamic conservatism, in America she has to take recourse to Parsi conservatism to bring her daughter back to the Parsi fold." (84)

It is clear that the novel is deeply concerned with culture and identity. The Parsi community is depicted as a beleaguered fighting off all outside influences. They refuse assimilation into majority culture. There are three cultures represented in the novel. The Parsi, the Muslims, and the American. The Muslim and the American cultures are alien and to be resisted according to Parsi thinking. The end result is the breakdown of a relationship and personal sorrow.

The novel raises certain important issues regarding identity and culture, while language is not so much stressed as it is a Pakistani novel written in English. The Parsi culture is depicted in minute detail in the novel: its prayers, its customs, and its costumes. This gives the novel its unique Parsi flavour, but it also emphasises the closedness of the community.

There is also a generation gap that is emphasised, the older generation which acts as chorus in the novel represents the conservatism in the community while younger generation both resists and rebel against this.

We can say that in *An American Brat* depicts a community at the crossroads poised for change and yet unwilling to embrace the brave new world of homogenised global culture. Increasingly the world has become aware of 'identity politics'. As the world shrinks to the dimensions of global village due to all pervasive impact of communication, tendencies and satellite television, the danger of a unique civilization based on Western norms becomes an increasingly feared possibility. This can result in a backlash with non-western people fiercely and violently safeguarding their identity. The resistance to the hegemony of the West is taking fearful form worldwide today. Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* is a charming tale on the surface, but tangiently and impricently comments upon the hold of the Westernization on the youth and its inevitable reaction.

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